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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the claims of technology's ability to enhance citizen participation, with particular attention focused on the Internet. The claims are grounded within the larger context of political theory, specifically the tension between representative and direct forms of democracy. Sections of the paper are: Introduction; "What's Wrong with Government and Politics Today?"; "The Citizens We Ought To Be"; "The Citizens We Are"; "Elitist Theory of Democracy and the Argument for Representative Democracy"; "Increasing Citizen Participation: The Pros and Cons"; "Information Technology and Citizen Participation"; "Internet as Democracy's Venue"; "Internet: Democratic to a Fault"; "The Internet and Electronic Democracy: Under Construction"; and Conclusion. (Contains 19 references.) (EH)

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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND CITIZEN PARTICIPTION

BY

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Information Technology and Citizen Participation

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Date: 13 May 1995 18:28:55 GMT
From: Anonymous@meeting.fedworld.gov (Rand Knox)
To: partdemo@meeting.fedworld.gov
Subject: DEMORACY DIRECT
Message-ID: <3p2tp7\$2dk@meeting.fedworld.gov>

So-called "representative" government was a very good design before the days of the telegraph, telephone, car and the computer. However, representative government has become filtered through the elitism of special interested and moneyed special interests at the peril of the public interest.

To address this shortcoming and to evolve government and democracy, it time to abolish the lower House of Representatives and replace it with direct democracy where we the people legislate from our living rooms by phone and personal identification voting numbers. The internet, C-span, and other media has evolved to allow us to educate ourselves sufficiently to act collectively as a direct check on the Upper House, the Presidency and the Courts, which likewise would remain in place to check the tyranny of the masses.

Introduction

The e-mail message above was one of dozens that appeared as part of an experimental national electronic open meeting on "People And Their Governments In The Information Age," held during the first two weeks of May 1995, and sponsored in part by the Office of Management and Budget.¹ According to the invitation to join the discussion, the national electronic open meeting was "part of an ongoing effort to broaden public participation in creating an electronic government." One of the subtopics of the meeting, supported by its own listserver, was participatory democracy, which focused on "ensuring

¹Other sponsors included the Administration's Information Infrastructure Task Force (IITF), the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), the National Technical Information Service's (NTIS) FedWorld, and the National Performance Review (NPR).

everyone's chance to be heard in a democracy."² And many people's voices were indeed heard, often expressing sentiments similar to those of Rand Knox above.

Disenchantment with an apparent lack of responsiveness to citizens' interests by elected representatives and with the negative impact of special interests, faith in the collective wisdom of citizens and the positive consequences of greater citizen participation, and faith in the power of technology to expand civic participation are all apparent in this and many other messages exchanged in the electronic meeting. Such a rejection of representative democracy in favor of more direct democracy is not new, and reflects a persistent tension in American political life with roots reaching back well beyond the Constitutional Convention. Added to the mix in current discussion about the future of American democracy is potentially revolutionary impact of new information technologies on civic life. Electronic tools of the Information Age are transforming many of our nation's institutions. As the message above argues, government and politics are not likely to be immune from technology's touch.

This paper explores the claims for technology's ability to enhance citizen participation, focusing particular attention on the Internet. The claims, however, are grounded within the larger context of political theory; specifically, the tension between representative and direct forms of democracy. This must be addressed first.

What's Wrong with Government and Politics Today?

Demands for greater citizen participation in government decision making seem to rise and fall on waves of dissatisfaction with existing social conditions and, most especially, with a lack of trust in elected representatives. Populists of

²Other listservs supported the following topics: Services (from emergency help and health care to business licenses); Benefits (from Social Security and food stamps to small business grants); Information (from declassified secrets and economic statistics to satellite maps); and Technology (how the technical portion of electronic government will work).

the late 19th century saw greater citizen participation through direct democracy as a way to wrest power from the railroads, trusts, and monopolies that held sway over state and national legislatures. The Progressive Era in the early 20th century and the grassroots politics of today have been animated similarly by a desire to bring political discussion out of "smoke-filled rooms" and to remove political power from representatives who are perceived to have sacrificed the public interest to special interests.

Even the casual newspaper reader can find evidence of a growing disquiet among everyday citizens and political commentators about the quality of civic life in America. More and more people believe that they are individually and collectively losing control of the forces that govern their lives, and that the moral fabric of their communities is unraveling (Sandel 1996). Citizens are becoming more cynical about politics generally and, as a result, are abandoning the electoral process at both the national and local levels (Nealon 1995). They perceive that the decisions of their representatives are up for bid to special interest groups; that those representatives and special interests spend a considerable amount of time and money manipulating public opinion rather than listening to it. As a result, there seems to be little incentive to become the informed and participative citizens we ought to be.

The Citizens We Ought To Be

Underlying popular discontent about civic life are a collection of assumptions about how government ought to be and, by implication, how citizens ought to be. These assumptions derive from a classical theory of democracy, characterized by Walker (1966) as:

the familiar doctrine of popular rule, patterned after the New England town meeting, which asserts that public policy should result from extensive, informed discussion and debate. By extending general participation in decision making the classical theorists hoped

to increase the citizen's awareness of his moral and social responsibilities, reduce the danger of tyranny, and improve the quality of government. (p. 285)

Active engagement and participation of citizens is the keystone of classical theory, because in citizens alone resides the general will, the essence of sovereignty. And the general will, according to Rousseau, cannot be represented. "Any law which the people has not ratified in person is void; it is not law at all" (Rousseau, The Social Contract, Book III, Ch. 15, p. 141).

Classical theories of democracy place a high premium on self-rule by an engaged citizenry, dispersed power, and the common good pursued through collective deliberation. As Sandel (1996) points out, political systems so constituted require a significant level of solidarity and character (or virtue) on the part of citizens. Participation has an educative effect on citizens, alerting them to their civic duties and helping them to recognize the common good. Responsible citizenship is multi-faceted and active and informed.

The Citizens We Are

For most citizens, citizenship is not multifaceted and active. Quite the contrary. Public opinion survey research in after World War II (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell, Guring, and Miller 1954; Lasswell 1948) revealed that few citizens were active participants in the political process; low voter turnout was one indicator of this. Moreover, the informed citizen was the exception rather than the rule.

Neither interest nor knowledge has changed much in the last forty years. According to a recent survey of randomly-selected adults by the Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University, millions of Americans cannot answer even basic questions about American politics (Washington Post 1996). Three of four respondents were not aware that senators

are elected for six years. Four in ten did not know that Republicans control both chambers of Congress. Moreover, the less informed are less likely to participate in politics. Both becoming informed and participating take time, a commodity most people believe is in short supply these days.

Elitist Theory of Democracy and the Argument for Representative Democracy

Our system of government works despite ill-informed and inactive citizens. Political theorists responded to this contradiction of classical theory by dividing the political system into two groups: the elite and the remaining mass of citizens. The success of democracy rests on the elites being informed and participative; the citizen's role is limited to choosing among competing elites within a broad political consensus. It is the chosen elite, the representatives of the people, who engage in the kind of deliberation that, according to classical theory, would normally reside in the people themselves.

Citizens who are ill-informed are not without opinions, of course. Public opinion polling has risen to a high art and a mainstay of American politics. The science of public opinion surveying has improved significantly over the last four decades, so that we are able to gauge fairly accurately the current state of ill-informed public opinion on a wide range of issues.

The Founders recognized, however, that opinion is not the same as judgment, and opted to eschew direct democracy in favor of a representative system that places greater weight on *deliberation* by elected representatives than on the *political equality* of that direct democracy would achieve (Fishkin 1992). In Federalist 10, Madison drew the fundamental distinction between a republic and a (direct) democracy:

The effect [of a republic] is . . . to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely

to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose. (Hamilton, Jay, and Madison, p. 59)

Such an arrangement would have the dual benefit of increasing deliberation on matters of the public interest and minimizing the likelihood of a tyranny of the majority. Hamilton stated the matter more pointedly in Federalist 71:

The republican principle demands that the deliberate sense of the community should govern the conduct of those to whom they intrust [sic] the management of their affairs; but it does not require an unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion, or to every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men, who flatter their prejudices to betray their interests. It is a just observation, that the people commonly intend the public good. This often applies to their very errors. But their good sense would despise the adulator who should pretend that they always reason right about the means of promoting it. . . . When occasions present themselves, in which the interests of the people are at variance with their inclinations, it is the duty of the persons whom they have appointed to be the guardians of those interests, to withstand the temporary delusion, in order to give them a time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection. (Hamilton et. al., pp. 464-465)

Increasing Citizen Participation: The Pros and Cons

How should we respond, therefore, to calls for greater involvement (indeed, direct involvement) of citizens in deciding matters of national public policy? On the positive side, we recognize that the scope of citizen participation has expanded over the last two hundred years, both in terms of suffrage and (at the state and local level) the use of referenda, initiatives, and recall. Greater direct participation in decision making would likely ameliorate the current level of cynicism about government and increase citizens' recognition of their civic responsibilities. Direct decision making on important public issues would likely

encourage citizens to become more interested and better informed, and to appear more regularly in voting booths.

On the other hand, most citizens are not prepared to participate in anything approaching direct democracy. Citizens lack information and, as such, provide nothing more than uninformed opinion. Citizens lack the time and the resources to become sufficiently informed on the multitude of complex issues they would confront. Citizens are susceptible to manipulation by those who would stir up their passions and prejudices, or who would expend substantial sums of money to manipulate public opinion to serve their own, narrow special interest. In national plebiscites, there is little provision for the kind of cool-headed, face-to-face deliberation Madison and Hamilton believed was essential to the prevention of tyranny (and which is simply not possible on a national scale).

Information Technology and Citizen Participation

Proponents of "teledemocracy" believe that new information technologies will make direct democracy possible while avoiding the problems ascribed to it by its critics. Claims Benjamin Barber (1984), "interactive systems have a great potential for equalizing access to information, stimulating participatory debate across regions, and encouraging multichoice polling and voting informed by information, discussion, and debate. It suggests ways to overcome the problem of scale and to defeat technological complexity by putting technology to work for popular democratic ends" (p. 276).

Technology will, according to proponents, (1) make it technically possible for the mass of citizens at large to register their opinions on matters of national public policy and (2) provide citizens with a virtually limitless volume of information on which to base their decisions. The greatest obstacle to overcome is the widespread dissemination of technology throughout the society. Enter the Information Superhighway.

Internet as Democracy's Venue

The current instantiation of an information superhighway is the Internet, a network of networks constructed by the U.S. military in the early 1970s. In thirty years, the Internet has expanded dramatically, both in terms of the nodes in the system and the number and types of users. For some time, electronic mail remained the easiest application to fathom; access to information collections was cumbersome, assuming that you knew exactly where to look. The development of "gopher" software in the early 1990s made searching for information sources more accessible to non-technical users of the Internet. With the development of the World Wide Web, navigating the information resources of the Internet has been made substantially easier than in the past, allowing users to track down information through hotlinks, specialized screen text that, when clicked on, sends the user to another location/node on the Internet that contains information related to that which s/he seeks.

Locating information is only half the story. The other half is the freewheeling exchange of opinions that the Internet supports. On the Internet, democracy approaches anarchy.

Internet: Democratic to a fault. Three well-meaning recently political scientists endeavored to electronically survey Internet users about their use of the system for political purposes, in an effort to describe some models of electronic democracy and to describe how folks use the Internet to participate in civic life (Fisher, Margolis, and Resnick 1994). Among their findings was a strong aversion to the survey, as evidenced by a significant number of "flames" received. They also discovered some of the difficulties associated with sampling and reliability. In the case of the former, they discovered that numerous respondents had taken the liberty of forwarding the electronic survey to multiple other recipients. Given the power of editing and an ASCII-based survey

instrument, a number of respondents decided to alter the survey, adjust questions to their liking, add response categories, and the like, wreaking havoc with reliability.

The Internet is currently home for the full range of human experience. It is a place where anarchists, hate groups, and vintage car enthusiasts can meet like-minded folks, share information, and solicit new members. And there is a growing number of web sites whose purpose is to enhance citizen participation in national affairs.

Many "electronic democracy" websites feature frequent polling and publishing results. The website for GEORGE, the new political magazine, hosts weekly polls; one recent question was "How did you feel about President Clinton's recent statement that we were in a 'funk?'" Almost 60 percent agreed. Other websites are a bit more comprehensive. Democracy Place USA³ (figure 1) is an experiment in civic journalism (also called public journalism), a controversial effort to get the public media (newspapers, television, etc.) to listen to the needs and interests of citizens and use what they hear to help set the public agenda (Jurkowitz, 1996). Downtown at Democracy Place, visitors can access a wide range of information and respond to polls (figure 2).

Place figures 1 and 2 about here

Another electronic democracy website is the Jefferson Project,⁴ purported to be "the comprehensive guide to on-line politics." (see figure 3). Expressing your opinion only one of a substantial number of options, and many of the options that

³The website for Democracy Place USA is located at <http://democracyplace.org>

⁴The website for the Jefferson Project is located at <http://www.voxpop.org/jefferson>

appear on the site's homepage send the visitor to other, related websites (such is the nature of the World Wide Web).

Place figure 3 about here

The Internet and electronic democracy: Under construction. None of the current generation of electronic democracy websites passes muster for thoroughgoing direct democracy of the kinds wished for by the e-mailer at the outset of this paper. The Internet provides places to respond to an opinion poll. What we need are "public spaces that gather citizens together, enable them to interpret their condition, and cultivate solidarity and civic engagement" (Sandel 1996). We need public spaces for genuine deliberation. Part of those public spaces might be electronic in nature, but the technology has a long way to develop before it can begin to contribute to anything other than democracy by poll (Broder, 1994).

Conclusion

Regardless of the technology, we are well short of that potential Barber and others have claimed. Experiments in teledemocracy are recent and have been limited in scope. For example, the QUBE system initiated in Columbus, Ohio a number of years ago, demonstrated that information technology (in this case, interactive cable television) could link citizens in their homes directly to the site of decisions and can facilitate direct citizen participation in political decision making. Yet, experiments like QUBE have been of limited success. According to Arterton (1987), while the teledemocracy project he reviewed did seem to improve citizen access to decision making and broaden participation, the costs were substantial. So much so that those who were bearing the costs tended to want to have a substantial say in setting the agenda. Moreover, the technology

didn't seem to reduce apathy. Based on his research, Arterton judged that two-thirds of citizens simply will not participate, regardless of the technology.

Beyond enhancing the level of participation, information technology has not yet demonstrated that it can foster anything more than opinion sharing. Commenting on "electronic town meeting" efforts, including the one advanced by Ross Perot in the 1992 election, Michael Schudson (1992) commented:

For Perot, as for too many others, public opinion consists of individual preferences and values; the task is simply to find a technique good enough to ascertain them. For most democratic theorists, on the other hand, public opinion consists of opinions formed in public, as people collectively face public issues; it is not a set of inclinations, grunts, nods of approval and disapproval privately evolved and privately expressed to a pollster or voting machine. Democratic theory typically (and rightly) envisions a system of government organized as much to foster deliberation as to guarantee participation.

As a rich source for information or data, new electronic technologies already bring to citizen's fingertips the means to better understand political issues. But its use to broaden meaningful citizen participation at a national level has its limits, many of which were anticipated by the Founders two centuries ago.

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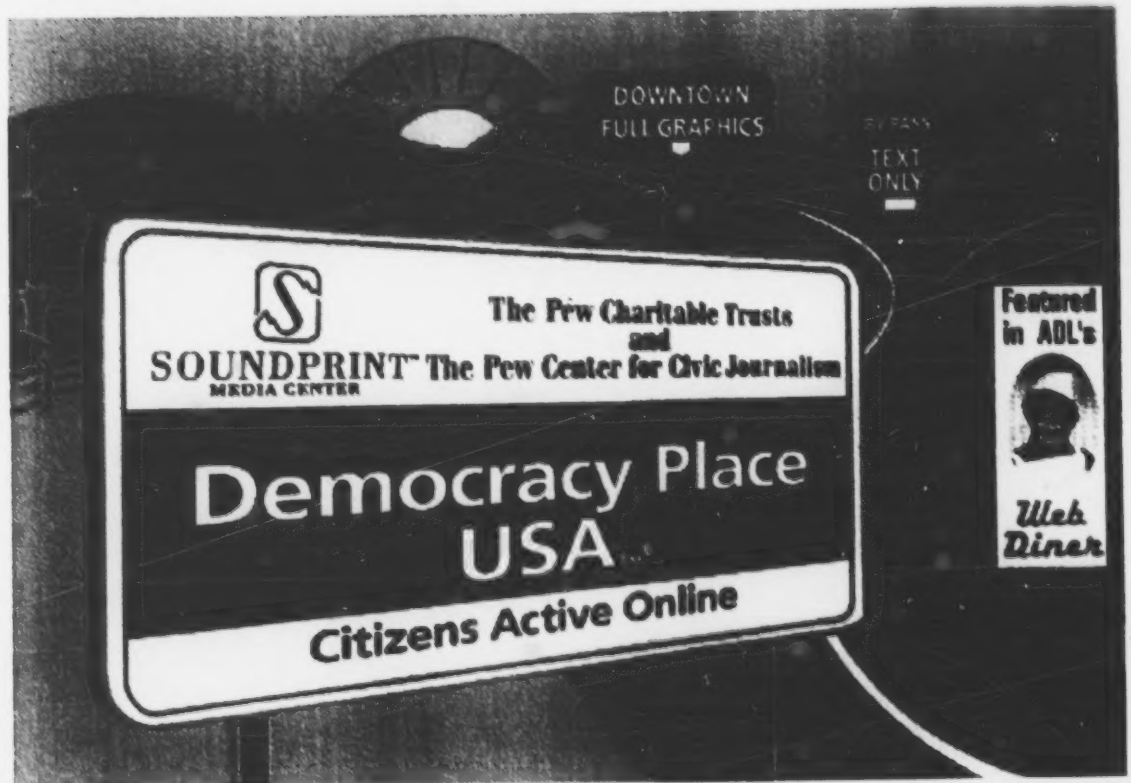


Figure 1 Democracy Place USA

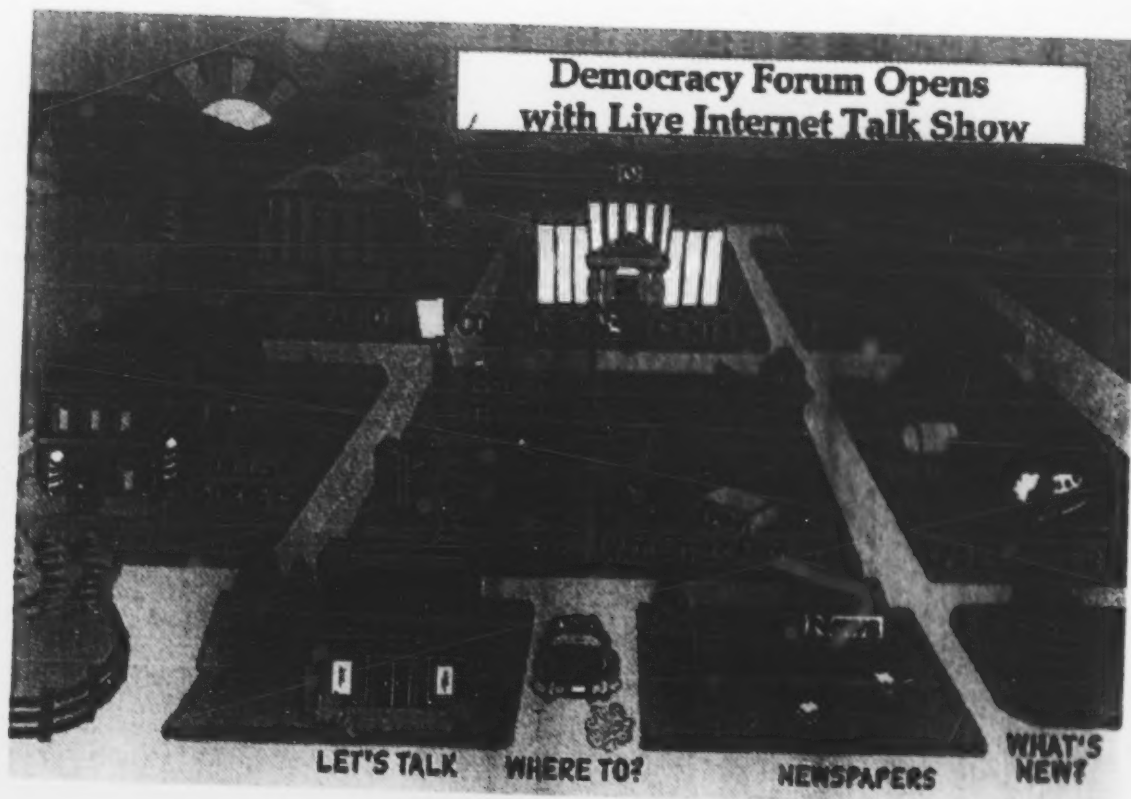


Figure 2 Democracy Forum

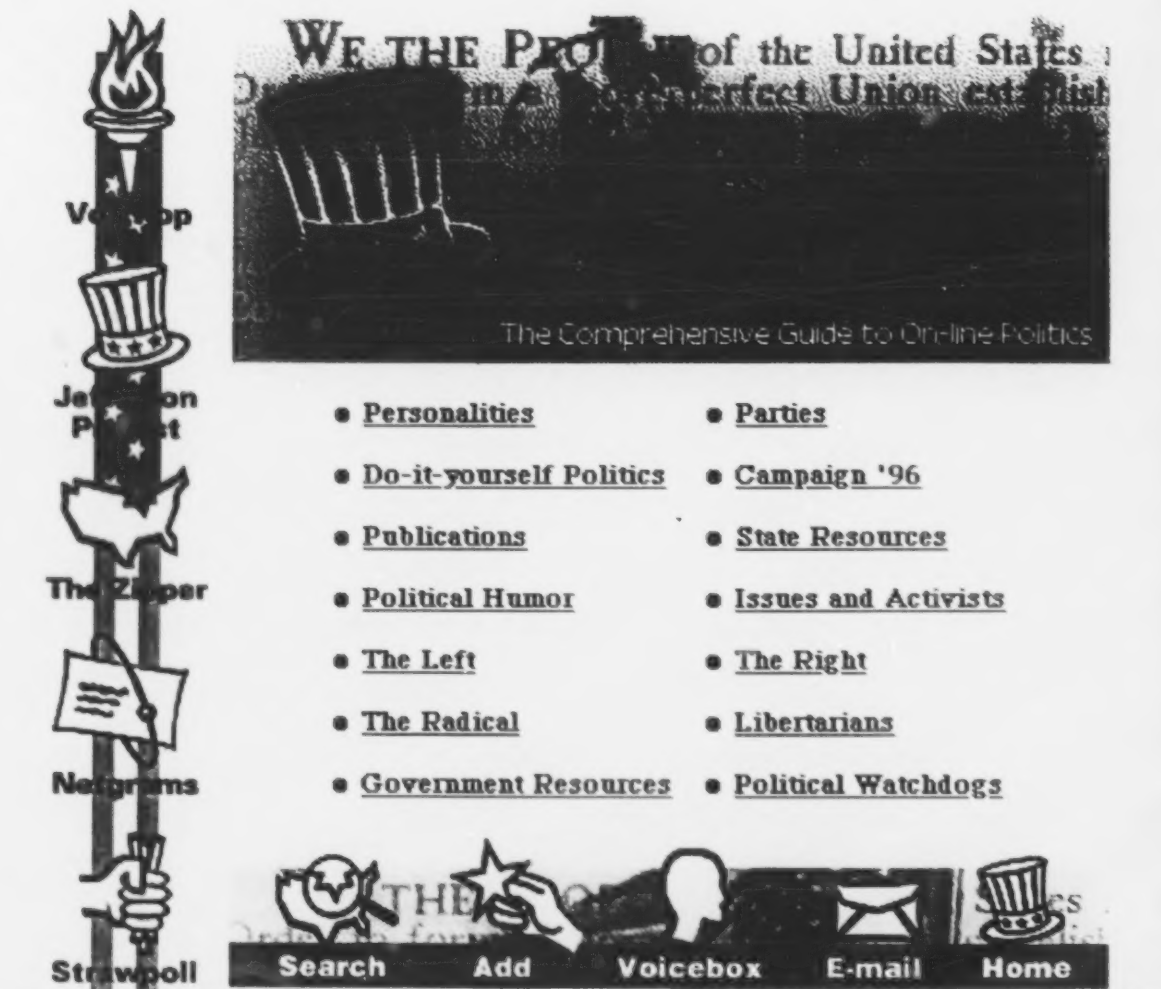


Figure 3 The Jefferson Project

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